

A movie poster for the film 'Worse Things'. The background is a dark, moody image of a woman's face in profile, looking upwards. A bright red lightning bolt strikes her hair. In the bottom left corner, a crowd of people is visible, with some raising their hands. The title 'WORSE THINGS' is written in large, bold, white serif capital letters. Above the title, the word 'TRIANGLED' is written in smaller, white, sans-serif capital letters.

TRIANGLED

WORSE THINGS

Worse Things by Triangled

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Angst

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., Mike W., Nancy W.

Pairings: Eleven/Jane H./Mike W.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-11 08:34:51

Updated: 2018-04-27 08:22:04

Packaged: 2019-12-16 23:08:26

Rating: T

Chapters: 7

Words: 17,740

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: The Wheeler parents are killed after insubordination in the hands of Brenner and his cronies. Mike and Nancy live as fugitives.

1. Stranger to Worse

A/N: Canon up until S01E07 - The Bathtub, when Brenner paid a visit to the Wheeler residence. This story is also on AO3 under *Ethosa*.

Steve Harrington leaned against his car, his hands shoved in his pockets.

It was November 18, 1983 at 3:23 in the afternoon, almost exactly a week since the Wheelers' disappearance. He was at Maple Street, in front of the Wheelers' residence. He's been visiting the past 5 days, ever since he's stopped hearing from Nancy. He knew it was kind of weird to hang out in front of his girlfriend's—*ex*—empty house, but he stopped caring about 3 days ago.

That's what he always did; not care.

...and it made him lose the first person he ever cared about.

If someone were to be asked what he looked like, they would've said he looked pensive, conflicted, maybe even a little bit lost—they would be right. For the first time in Steve Harrington's life, his face showed exactly what he felt.

The first days were a bit weird, as he tried to actively fight off the show of emotions his face made, and he sometimes ended up with a weird, crumpled expression, his bruises pulsating with pain as his face muscles tensed. So, he just stopped fighting, stopped *not* caring, and started caring a whole damn lot that it *hurt*.

How mundane it felt to hurt. It was almost natural—like he didn't spend years and years carefully avoiding getting hurt, and now, when he's finally hurting, it all came crashing down almost into place. It hurt, yeah, but most importantly it felt *real*. The prospect would have scared him shitless 3 weeks ago, but now, with Nancy and the rest of the Wheelers gone without a trace, his previous fears almost felt small and stupid; because *this* was scary.

But Steve Harrington always thought of himself as a bit of a coward.

With a hard swallow, he climbed back in his car and drove off.

One Week Later

Cold.

For the past few days, that was all Nancy Wheeler knew.

Shivering was almost normal, so was the constricting of her stomach, as did the tears that always threatened to flow out of her eyes—but *cold* always seemed to loom over everything, like a shadow that towered over her, except that the shadow was very much alive and always held her by the throat.

She took in a ragged breath, curling into herself more, as if she could. She's been walking around the woods for days, and have started tallying the days on her forearm, using the pen she carried everywhere; there were currently 12 lines on her wrist. It's what's kept her sane for the past few days, because she needed something to prove to herself that everything was *real*, and she was still *alive*.

Even though her parents weren't.

Even though she didn't know whether Mike and Holly was.

She saw the big, hollow, tree trunk she was currently lying in on the fifth day she roamed around the woods. She almost raced towards it, desperate for some semblance of a shelter. It had rained the day before, and she had dreaded the feeling of being soaked through the bone, as she woke up shivering and coughing. It didn't help that the repetitive pattering of the rain drops on her skin almost sent her on overdrive.

Her eyes snapped open at the unmistakable sound of crunching leaves a few feet away. Her breath hitched ever so slightly, making her clamp a hand over it. A terrifying chill crawled up her spine, as she desperately tried to still herself. She didn't even know why she was afraid, it's just that she was already reveling the fact that she hadn't encountered any trouble whilst galivanting through the woods, and just as quickly, the prospect of having to potentially face one at

this moment—when she's weak, hungry, and cold—didn't sit well with her. She wouldn't be able to handle it.

But as fast as the sound came, it disappeared. Nancy slowly counted to three, to make sure, but no further sound came. She mentally debated with herself if she should sneak a peek outside her log, and ultimately decided that she literally didn't have *anything* else to lose, so she steeled herself to move from her position.

She took a deep breath, almost like bracing herself, and stood up on shaky legs.

She peered through the nearby trees after she snatched a rock from the ground, hoping to throw it to whoever the intruder was, not even paying mind of the prospect that maybe whoever crept on her log *wasn't* an intruder. Her heart thumped against her chest, fearful of the uncertain.

The woods were as silent as ever—then another crunch.

It seemed closer this time. She almost jumped when she heard it, only barely managing to steady herself. She glimpsed a flash of movement through the leaves of the bush across from her position, and adrenaline filled her senses. She raced to the position she deduced where the intruder was, intending to tackle it the ground, until—

Nancy didn't get the chance to stop herself when she came face to face with the brown eyes that were the same as hers.

"Oomf!" Mike grunted as the full weight of his sister crashed onto him.

As soon as they hit the ground, Nancy rolled off. "Mike!" she exclaimed, almost unbelievably. She hastily stood up, her legs still shaking. She pulled her brother up, holding him at arm's length as she checked for injuries. "Are you *okay*?" she asked him, even though he looked a lot better than she did.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he answered, brushing his sister off. "I'm the one who should be asking you—"

"I've been so worried."

Mike blinked, stunned. He wasn't used to his sister's concerns. "L-Like I said, I'm fine," he said, his voice almost cracking. He's been pushing away whatever weight he's been feeling in his chest the past few days, and now a lump was forming in his throat. He swallowed hard.

Nancy stood facing her brother, her head swimming. "Good, that's good." She made a move and clutched his hand. "I'm—"

"It's okay. It's fine. We gotta go," said Mike, cutting off the potentially awkward conversation.

"What do you mean we gotta go?" asked Nancy, confusion written on her face. "Where have you been?"

"I'll explain when we get there, we just gotta go." He took in her condition, and deduced that maybe running wasn't the best way to go, so he settled in brisk walking. Mike didn't leave a lot of space for more questions, as he turned and tugged on the hand his sister held.

Nancy followed, reluctantly agreeing with her brother. She felt like she was floating, the adrenaline from before slowly fading. Little by little, she felt the cold creeping up her spine again, as she desperately tried to shake it off. She just tightened her hold on Mike's hand, only trying to pay attention on taking fast steps, letting him lead the way.

Mike felt his sister squeeze, and he knew she wouldn't last long. "Hey!" he almost shouted at her. "You have to say awake, okay?" He slightly turned his head back to sneak a look at her, feigning annoyance, even though his heart thumped against his chest. She looked too far from fine. "Come on, tell me what you've been up to," he coaxed her, attempting to keep her conscious.

She felt her throat dry. "It's been 12 days," she said, as if it explained everything.

Mike squeezed her hand. "Yeah, I know. I've been counting too," he said. He once again swallowed down the rush of emotions that came with that statement. "Where have you been staying?"

"Inside a log."

"Last time you had water?"

"Rain."

He felt his throat hitch. "Eaten?"

"Nothing."

Tears stung the corner of his eyes, and he hastily wiped them off with his free hand. He decided to pause the barrage of questions he sent his sister, guilt pooling in his stomach, focusing instead on pulling her as he walked.

"Holly?" Nancy's voice was so quiet, Mike almost didn't hear, but it didn't stop the hammer of emotions that pounded him.

After a few seconds of silence, he said, "I don't—" but he couldn't get himself to continue. He closed and opened his eyes, his jaw clenching. "I almost thought she was with you."

Suddenly, the world felt like it was crashing down. Nancy dropped on her knees, still clutching Mike's hand, as the tears she's been holding for the past 12 days came bursting out. She couldn't help herself anymore. She didn't mind that she accidentally kneeled on a particularly pointy rock. She brought her hands to her face, hoping to shield out the sobs, but it did little.

She didn't even notice herself apologizing repeatedly, and Mike knelt in front of her, his head down, his hands on his lap. His bottom lip trembled, and he wanted to wail and sob, but he allowed his sister this moment. So, he just knelt in front of her, reveling in their grief together.

2. Abode

Nancy barely made out the outline of a wooden cabin in the distance.

"We're almost there," Mike panted. He carried most of Nancy's weight, with her arm circled around his shoulders; it was an awkward position, given their height difference, but Nancy could barely stand on her own, much less walk on her own.

After their *moment*, they stared awkwardly at each other, before wrapping the other in a hesitant hug. Nancy's energy suffered an immediate crash after that; physically, mentally, and emotionally drained.

"M'kay," she mumbled, more to let her brother know that she was still conscious rather than acknowledging his statement. She blinked, trying to get past the droopiness of her eyes. She was getting sleepier and sleepier by the second. By this point, the only reason she's been getting from place to place was because Mike has been practically dragging her.

"Hopper's gonna be back in a few hours," said Mike. "He's the one I've been staying with."

"Oh." Nancy was a lot more shocked than it seemed, but just couldn't express it given her condition.

They've reached the cabin's porch, the next challenge being the porch steps. "Okay, let's do this right," he began, adjusting his hold on his sister to guide her back. "One step at a time."

Nancy complied, grateful for her brother. She never took him as the gentleman type, but here he is guiding her in the simple task of leading her up a few steps. He offered his hand as leverage, which she gratefully accepted, gripping his hand as she pulled herself up the small steps. By the time she reached the top, hair clung to her forehead with sweat.

Mike momentarily left his sister to balance against the porch railing, so he could unlock the door. "Stay awake, alright?" he shouted. "I just

gotta unlock this thing, Hopper set up 3 locks because he's kinda paranoid, you know? I can't blame him, though, with everything that's went on. It's kind of hard to not be at least a little paranoid." Mike babbled on, to give his sister something to focus on and to stop her from falling asleep.

Nancy was already swaying when she felt her brother grip her arm to lead her inside. He led her to the couch nearby, plopping her down. He rushed to his designated bedroom, yanked his blanket, and went back out to wrap it around his sister.

For the first time in days, Nancy was *cozy*. She hugged the blanket around her, wrapping herself tighter. She sighed at the rush of warmth that enveloped her body.

Mike knelt in front of her. "Alright, I know you're tired," he acknowledged, "but I think you gotta eat something first. I still have some leftover Eggo's from breakfast, let me go get it and don't sleep yet, okay?" He immediately stood up, and walked over to the impromptu kitchen Hopper set up. There was a plate of stale waffles on one of the counters, which he grabbed and brought back to Nancy.

"Just, like, nibble on it or something," he advised. "Don't eat it too fast, that's what I did, and my stomach hurt so bad I felt like I was dying."

Nancy obliged, taking a small, obedient bite on the waffle. Just that small bite left her feeling ravenous, the result of days of starvation, but she restrained herself and heeded her brother's advice, taking another small bite off her waffle.

After she finished her waffle (which almost took an hour), she practically passed out on the couch, still sitting down with her head lolled backwards. Mike thought her neck was going to get sore when she woke up, but decided against interrupting her well-deserved sleep. He retreated to his 'room', lied down on the bed, and stared at the ceiling with his hands tucked under his head.

He'd been lying to Hopper every day.

He had been strictly instructed to *not* leave the cabin for any reason,

and to *not* open the door, unless Hopper did their secret knock. The consequences of being seen by the wrong people were great, and Mike vaguely understood that. He knew Hopper was only protecting him, but a sense of obligation *gnawed* at his stomach, so he left the cabin every day Hopper wasn't around and scouted the vicinity, hoping to see some sign of Nancy or... *Eleven*.

He's even postponed the grief that's been looming over him all these days, because there were more important things to think about; such as his two missing siblings, Will, the rest of his friends who didn't even know if he was still *alive*, and Eleven.

Mike would never forget the look of terror that quickly made itself known on Eleven's face when he desperately grabbed her while she faced off the Demogorgon. He immediately felt a tremendous force that tugged him from all directions, and he ended up slimy and cold on the floor of Hawkins Middle School... except it wasn't *really* Hawkins Middle School, because it looked aged and *vine-y*, and Hawkins wasn't *this* cold.

He found a way out while he roamed the halls screaming for Eleven. He spotted the pulsating light from a distance, and he immediately raced towards it. He could vaguely hear voices from the other side, so he tentatively reached his hand out, pushing further out to break the membrane that seemed to coat it. His hand didn't get cut off when he pulled it back, so he decided to squeeze himself into the small, gooey entrance. He found himself back in the real Hawkins Middle School, albeit covered in grime and goo. In a fit of fear, he immediately bolted when he heard voices rounding the corner.

He didn't even know where he was supposed to go; he didn't have the time to look for Nancy, he didn't know where Eleven was, and he didn't want his friends' families to suffer the same fate his did. So, he just ran, until he ended up in the forest. He ran as far as his legs could take him, which, admittedly, wasn't very far, but it was far enough for someone to not accidentally run into him.

He stayed wandering in the forest for 3 days until he came across the chief. By that time, he was desperate. He was hungry and cold, and the chief didn't have to convince him long to come with him, so he brought him to an old, dusty, rundown cabin that once belonged to

his grandfather, in the middle of the forest. They fixed it up as best as they could.

Finding Nancy was a turn of luck. Hopper told him that he's been leaving food at an isolated box in the forest each day, and he's been checking it everyday to see if someone's gotten it. The food inside always remained untouched, that is until their fifth day together, when Hopper checked in on it and saw the box empty. Mike almost choked on his food, immediately standing up, determined to find Nancy, because no one else could've been roaming around the forest aimlessly for days—and then it him.

He felt his throat hitch. "Eaten?"

"Nothing."

He failed to suppress the involuntary gasp that made its way out of his mouth.

Then he heard Hopper's secret knock echo around the cabin. The chief was back. He pushed himself to his feet, and rushed to open the door. He didn't even give him the time to take his hat off before he yawped, "Hop!"

But Hopper's eyes immediately fell on the teenage girl asleep on the couch. "Is that—"

"It's Nancy," he verified, "but *listen*."

"She found us?" Hopper asked, his voice laced with disbelief.

"No, *I found her*," Mike put out, hoping to get it over with to move on to the more important things.

"*What!?*" Hopper's voice seemed to vibrate throughout the whole, wooden cabin, and it even startled Nancy awake. She woke with a gasp, but Hopper was too fed up with Mike that he didn't get the chance to properly acknowledge her. "*What the hell did I tell you?*" he scolded, one hand making its way to his hip, while the other pointed at him in admonishment.

Mike winced at his tone. "I know, I know," he admitted, sheepish.

"But *listen*—ask her, she hasn't eaten in *days*, do you know what that means? She isn't the one touching the box."

Hopper looked at him, shocked. "If it's not her, then—"

"Eleven," declared Mike. "She *must* be out there somewhere, it can't be anyone else."

"What makes you so sure, kid?" Hopper looked skeptical.

"I don't—I'm not—I just *know*," he stammered. "I mean, who else could it be?"

Hopper sighed as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Right," he decided. "I'll go check around to see if she's anywhere near the box for an hour or so. I have some food in my truck, so you can get started with dinner with your sister over there."

"Or I can go with you," suggested Mike. "It's gonna be faster, we can split up—"

"No, kid," said Hopper, cutting him off with finality. "You know the rules, even though you've been breaking them for god knows how long."

"But I—"

"I said, *no*."

Nancy's soft voice made its way to them. "It's too much of a risk, Mike."

They didn't make sense at all. "But I've been sneaking out every damn day and haven't been caught!" he defended, albeit a bit stubbornly. "And who found Nancy? Not *you*! Because you keep waiting for them to find *us*, when it's really *us* who should be finding *her*!"

"*Look*, kid," countered the chief, "you are a *fugitive*, you hear me? You know what they're saying in that damn town? They say the Wheeler kids have been possessed by some demon that made them murder their parents, or that you've become the new Michael Myers or something. My point is, those fuckers from Hawkins Lab aren't your

only enemies, alright? The whole fucking town is against you, and as little as a god damn sighting of that Wheeler boy is going to send people here in *droves*."

Hopper ran a hand over his face, and sighed in exasperation. "I'm here to protect you, kid," he stated, gentler now. He shifted his gaze to look at Nancy. "I'm here to protect the both of you. And Eleven too, once we find her."

"Thank you," said Nancy, giving him a tight smile.

Mike only stood there, stunned. He knew the rumor mill at Hawkins was outrageous, but he never knew how *cruel* it could be. "I didn't know it was that bad," he faltered. "I mean, I knew people would talk, but..." He trailed off, not knowing what he expected. Truth be told, he never really thought about it, but the weight still crashed onto him.

"You just never thought they'd be that horrible," finished Nancy.

Mike glanced at her, and chuckled lamely. "Well, welcome to the loser's club."

"Oh, please, you're welcoming the person who Steve Harrington called a slut via spray paint?" Nancy smirked at her brother's incredulous expression.

"What? He did *what*—"

"Alright," interrupted Hopper, "I'll go grab the food, so you can both eat, while I scout the forest for any sign of the girl."

Mike only nodded, not wanting to argue it anymore.

Hopper returned to his truck and came back with a bucket of fried chicken. "Good thing I decided on a bucket today, with the unexpected company and all that," he commented. He set it down on the table before grabbing his hat and putting it on. "I'll be back in another hour or so, in the meantime, *don't leave*," he said sternly, looking pointedly at Mike, before leaving.

Mike resisted the urge to childishly stick his tongue out. He settled

onto the small dining table, and looked expectantly at Nancy when she didn't make the move to join him. "What?" he asked her, brows crinkled.

"I don't know," she said pensively. "Something feels weird."

"Oh, does your stomach hurt?" Mike asked.

"What? No."

"Then what?"

"I don't know."

Mike only gave her a look, then said, "Of course this is gonna be weird."

Nancy finally stood up and joined her brother at the small dining table. "Right? I mean..." she trailed off.

"You can say it."

She swallowed. "Mom and dad are dead, Mike."

Mike turned his head, avoiding her eyes, maybe. "Yeah."

There was deafening silence, before she interjected, "We're gonna have to talk about it—"

"But not now," interrupted Mike. "I mean—yeah, they're d-d—" he took in a deep breathe "*—dead...* but there are still some things going on that we gotta work on... Holly..."

"I don't think she's dead," Nancy blurted.

"What? What do you mean?" he asked.

"Do you think they'd kill a little girl? Are they that cruel?"

"I don't know... I think, maybe—"

"What do you know about them?"

"About who?"

"About the people who killed mom and dad."

"They're—they're *cruel*, Nancy. My friend, you know, Eleven... she doesn't even know her real name—hell, they didn't even give her a proper name! They just call her by a number, like some lab rat..."

"Do you know the others?" asked Nancy.

"What others?"

"Well, if she's number eleven... then who's One? Or Two? Or Ten?"

Mike stayed silent, not knowing what to say.

"I can't even—" Nancy let out a harsh breath, closing her eyes.

"What?"

"What if Holly becomes Twelve, Mike?"

November 12, 1983

"...but in order for me to do that, you need to trust me."

There was a hint of a smile behind Brenner's words.

Karen Wheeler's brow crinkled, a whine of panic forming in her head. Her face was tear stained and her hand clutching Ted's. She trusted her kids to *behave*, to become *regular* teenagers and children who complained about school; the extent of their rebellion to just nick a few quarters from her purse to buy candies or cigarettes.

But, may god have mercy, to hide a *fugitive*? She doesn't even know if the girl with shaved hair on the picture was a fugitive... *is she as dangerous as this man claims?*

'*What did my son get himself into?*' she thought in frustration.

But Mike was never a stupid kid, she had to give him that. Her son was a regular nerd; an avid member for the A/V Club, won first place at the State Science Fair... a stupid boy won't be all that. He may be

deemed *lame* at school, but Mike Wheeler was far from stupid.

"Will you trust me?" Brenner's voice thumped in her head.

Then Karen Wheeler had a redeeming moment of clarity.

"Get out of my house," she hissed.

Brenner tilted his head to the side, in confusion. "I beg your pardon?"

"I said," Karen fumed, "*get out of my house.*"

She felt Ted give her hand a squeeze. "Darling, is there something wrong?" he asked in caution.

Unfazed, Karen abruptly stood up, taking Ted with her, and pointed an accusing finger towards Brenner. "There's nothing wrong with me, but there may be something wrong with you," she spat. "I don't trust you, but I trust my son."

"Mrs. Wheeler—"

"No."

There was a deafening silence.

Brenner looked down to the floor and sighed in frustration. He glanced at Connie Frazier, who gave a slight nod.

In a split second, both Wheelers were down; their lifeless bodies sprawled on the floor.

3. A Golden Trio

A/N: This chapter has been revised.

Lucas Sinclair has not slept properly for 10 days.

He'd never admit it, of course. He knew the Demogorgon was gone, or it was, at least, far from where he was. He'd never admit still being scared—he liked being the rational one among his friends. The Demogorgon was gone. There was no more reason to be scared. So, he pretended to not be scared.

Although, he doubted Dustin, or Will, especially, had been sleeping fine, too.

When Will woke up, Lucas and Dustin immediately filled him up with what he's missed: Eleven coming and going, the Wheeler parents getting killed, and Mike, Nancy, and Holly's disappearance. Will cried, but that was the extent of what they'd been able to share with the present company.

Ever since what they've dubbed as The Demogorgon Thing happened, they haven't had the chance to properly hang out. Most Party meetings have so far been chaperoned by at least one non-member. It annoyed the hell out of Dustin, which he voiced out on Lucas while gobbling five cans of chocolate pudding in stress at the Hospital Cafeteria.

The first time the three of them has been left alone was when Will finally got discharged after 4 days. His mom had to go back to work, Jonathan had to go to school (since the Hawkins High School building was untouched by the Demogorgon, and thus didn't need days off for repair unlike the Hawkins Middle School building), and Hopper had work. Will still wasn't accustomed to being left alone, which only left Lucas and Dustin to accompany him throughout the day.

Of course, they jumped at the chance.

As soon as Joyce's car drove out of their line of sight, Lucas and Dustin both grabbed each of Will's arms and pulled him out of the house, sitting abruptly at their front lawn. They wouldn't want to go too far.

"What?" Will asked them expectantly. "Why here?"

"There's something we haven't told you," admitted Lucas.

The entire story surrounding Mike and Eleven's disappearance poured out of them. How Dustin, Lucas, and Mike were momentarily left alone to hold it off, how Eleven woke up and did a much better job than them, how Mike ran towards her in desperation, and how they both vanished into thin air right before their eyes. Lucas had been speechless at the time, while Dustin punched the blackboard ("Look at this gnarly bruise on my fist," quipped Dustin, flashing his hand).

"Oh my god," Will breathed out once they finished their story. "Then there's probably a chance."

"What do you know?" asked Lucas.

"They're probably there, at the—at the Upside Down," said Will, eyes wild. "You said Eleven opened the gate? Maybe they've even already found a way out."

"Where would they be?"

That's when they started planning. They've laid out possible scenarios, the most feasible ones would either be that they were still stuck at the Upside Down, or they've gone in hiding at the forest ("Where else would a fugitive hide in Hawkins?" asked Dustin).

Their planning was cut short with the arrival of Hopper, who admonished them for staying out in the lawn rather than inside the house.

School resumed the next day after they've begun planning, and it's been 5 days with no progress at all; with Dustin and Lucas grounded until the end of the month, Will having to go home immediately after school, and of course, there was that pesky sworn-to-secrecy thing with the Department of Energy. They still had their Supercoms, of

course, but Dustin insisted to *not* talk about stuff too much on there, afraid that the government might be listening in.

"*Lucas, do you copy?*" his Supercom blared. It was Dustin's voice.

He picked it up. "Yeah, I copy."

"*Cool. I'm on my way to school. See you there. Over.*"

Lucas picked up his bag and ran down the stairs. He dashed straight for the door before his parents could call after him, shouting "See you at dinner!" while he ran. He vaguely heard Erica's voice yelling some sarcastic remark to insult him, but he wasn't really in the mood to deal with her.

Like any other day, he biked to school. It was a short trip, only taking him around 10 to 15 minutes to bring Hawkins Middle School into view. When he arrived at the school's gates, he was abruptly greeted by being pushed down. He grunted as he hit the floor, barely missing to dodge as his bike almost fell on top of him.

"Hey, freak!" someone yelled.

Lucas looked up and saw Troy and James towering over him. He inwardly groaned, standing up and dusting off his pants, trying his best to ignore them. He picked up his bike and chained it to the bike rack, when a hand landed on his shoulder to forcefully spin him around.

"I'm talking to you!" shouted Troy at his face. "I have some questions."

"What?" asked Lucas, a bit intrigued. But only a bit.

"Is it true what everyone's been saying?" began Troy, his lips curved into a ferocious smile. There was a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Did your freak of a friend Frogface finally show off his true colors?"

"What are you talking about?" Lucas pressed on, confused.

"They say he killed his own parents—don't know about his slut for a sister though."

Lucas crinkled his brows, seething at the accusation. "Fuck off," he retorted, shoving Troy away.

Troy staggered on his steps. "The hell did you say?" he warned.

Lucas only glared at him before turning, and began to walk away.

Troy chased after him. "Hey! I'm not—"

"What's going on here?" a bigger voice interrupted them. Lucas stopped in his tracks and turned to see Hopper with Will. The chief was eyeing down Troy. "What's the problem, kid?" he asked him.

"There! You can tell 'em what everyone's been saying!" Troy declared, looking between the chief and Lucas.

"What's everyone been saying?" asked Hopper.

"That Mike Wheeler killed his own parents!"

There was a staggering silence before Hopper said, "You sure about that?"

"How else would a whole family's disappearance be explained!?"

"Alright," Hopper seemed to empathize, "how about you tell me that at the police station, and when you're wrong, we can just sue you for filing a false report."

"W-What?" spluttered Troy.

"Get lost, kid," was all Hopper said, and both bullies were off running away. "Good riddance," he mumbled to himself before facing Will. "Okay, your brother will be picking you up at 4. I know your classes end at 3:15, but your friends are gonna keep you company?" He looked over at Lucas for clarification.

Lucas nodded vigorously.

Will grinned. "Alright," he beamed. Hopper ruffled his hair before leaving.

Lucas made a move to stand beside him, watching Hopper drive off on his police truck. "What's up with your mom and the chief?" he suddenly asked.

"*What?*" asked Will, incredulous.

He threw his hands up in defense, arguing, "I'm just saying, they seem closer."

Will gave him a disgusted look. "Is that what you think about in your spare time?" he shot at him. Truth be told, Will was glad to see his mom less lonely. Ever since he came back, Hopper has almost been a constant—bringing him to school, sometimes joining them for lunch, and even with the simplest things like picking up milk from the store.

It was almost kind of like having a proper dad.

"Hey guys!" Dustin has arrived.

"Good for you to finally show up," said Lucas.

"What did I miss?" Dustin asked, eager.

Lucas grinned despite himself. "The chief shut down Troy," he answered.

"Really!?" Dustin beamed, almost jumping in excitement.

Lucas and Will then proceeded to enthusiastically tell an exaggerated version of the story, babbling on until first period.

Steve Harrington broke out of his musings when the bell rang to signal the end of his class. Philosophy has always been dragging.

He raced out of the room, glancing around the hall for any sign of Jonathan Byers. The boy didn't show to any of the classes he had with him. He's been mustering up the courage to face him, wanting to apologize—and hopefully proposition. He'd devised a plan, but couldn't do it alone. Jonathan would be the only one who would care enough to even bother or consider it.

But first, he needed to find him; although it seems like he's nowhere to be found. He sighed in frustration. He's thought about asking his friends—if he even had any, since he was only ever close to—and then it hit him.

Of course.

Steve looked at his watch and swore when it said 3:30. The middle schoolers finish at 3:15. Not left with anymore of a choice, Steve immediately raced out of the building, quietly glad that the High School and Middle School were neighbors. When he reached the Middle School gates, he scanned the grounds until his eyes fell on the three kids huddled on a bench. He approached them cautiously.

Dustin was the first one who noticed him. He urgently whispered a hush to his friends, whose heads immediately snapped towards Steve.

"Uhm, hey," he greeted lamely. "I'm—"

"Steve Harrington," interrupted Dustin. "Yeah, we know."

Steve barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "I was gonna say I was looking for the bigger Byers, but thanks for the clarification," he shot. Dustin looked at him sheepishly. He brushed it off and looked pointedly at Will. "Have you seen him?"

"He told us he slept over at a friend's house last night..." answered Will, trailing off.

"What?" countered Steve, brows raised. "But he wasn't at school today."

Will immediately stood up. "What? Where is he, then?"

"That's why I'm here. I'm looking for him."

Will's hands clenched into fists as his face began to contort into a panicked expression. He stammered, "But—But he told us he'd just be sleeping over—"

"Will, calm down," said Lucas, who stood up behind him. He placed a hand on his shoulder, only for it to be brushed off.

"No!" retorted Will.

"I'm sure he's—"

A honk interrupted them. Lo and behold, Jonathan's car. "Hey, bud!" Jonathan shouted from the driver's seat window. His smile immediately disappeared at the sight of Will's panicked face. He got out of the car as Will broke from his friends to approach him.

Will abruptly stopped in front of him and glared.

"What's wrong?" he asked, scanning his friends. His eyes immediately fell on Steve. "What did you do?"

The tone didn't suggest accusation, but anger still bubbled up in Steve's chest. "Hey, I'm not the one who lied to him," he countered.

"What do you mean?"

"Where have you been?" hissed Will.

Jonathan was shocked with the tone of Will's voice. "I—I told you," he spluttered.

"Steve said you weren't at school."

Jonathan's head snapped towards Steve, who only shrugged. Of all things, he hadn't expected Steve Harrington to buy him out. He sighed, accepting defeat. "Alright, I just had some stuff I had to deal with," he admitted.

Will looked at him in disbelief. "What stuff?" he pressed on.

"Byers," called Steve, approaching them. "Hey, sorry to interrupt this family crisis, but I need to talk to you."

Jonathan looked at him expectantly.

"In private," he added, looking over at the kids.

Will gave a low glare at Jonathan before nodding and heading straight back to his friends.

"Over there by my car," Jonathan suggested. It wasn't the most private spot, but it was far enough so the kids wouldn't eavesdrop, and Jonathan wouldn't want Will to be out of his sight. They walked over to the other side.

"Okay," began Steve, "I'll cut to the chase. I wanna find Nancy."

Jonathan's eyebrows raised.

"I messed up with her," Steve admitted. "I fucked up—big time. Look, I'm sorry, alright? Don't worry, this isn't about me wanting to win her back, it's obvious you're into her—"

"I am *not*," defended Jonathan.

"Right, and I'm bald," shot Steve. "It's obvious, Byers. I'm not stupid."

"I—"

"Hey, I'm not here to argue about that," he interrupted. "Are you in?"

Jonathan sighed. "Fine."

"Cool, so here's my plan—"

"I've already started."

Steve stopped, and stared at him. "Wait, what?"

Jonathan scratched the back of his neck. "I've already been looking for her," he revealed, sheepish. "Nothing yet. It's why I didn't make it to school today."

"Oh," was all Steve could say.

"I was gonna go out again tonight," Jonathan supplied. "In the forest by Hawkins Lab, around 9 in the evening. You're free to join me."

"Oh, cool," said Steve flatly. "Yeah, alright. I'll be there."

Jonathan nodded, and turned to call Will. "Hey, Will! Ready to go?"

"Yeah!" came the answer.

Will gave a final nod to his friends before trudging off to his brother's car, riding shotgun.

Jonathan leaned towards Steve, and whispered, "No one can know, alright?" Steve only nodded. He shot him a look before climbing in his car's driver seat.

Steve watched them drive off, a spot of bother in his chest. Of *course*, Jonathan would beat him to his plan. It made him feel oddly inferior, but he swallowed it down. He had a rescue mission to get ready for.

"Okay, Cleric, do you copy?" Lucas whispered to his Supercom.

It was 10 in the evening, and he has successfully sneaked out of his house.

"*I copy*," came Will's voice. "*You sure about this?*"

Lucas, Dustin, and Will had been looking for the opportunity to finish planning their big mission for days. It got hard to plan Party meetings, even during A/V Club, with Mr. Clarke doting over them more than usual. So, they immediately huddled as soon as class was over, determined to finish planning before Jonathan came by to pick Will up.

"As sure as I can be," answered Lucas. "Have you gotten a hold on the Bard?"

"*Yep, he's approaching Mirkwood. Over*," answered Will through the Supercom.

Their plan consisted of Lucas and Dustin searching the forest together, with Will staying at home as their guy-on-the-outside... well, also, because Lucas and Dustin didn't want him to roam around the forest at night ("You can't come, not after..." Dustin trailed off. Lucas nodded in agreement). Will was kinda annoyed, but decided not to argue. They stuck to communicating with their Supercoms, using codenames to hopefully throw off whoever would be listening in, in true nerd fashion.

Lucas switched the channel. "Bard, do you copy?"

"*I copy, Ranger,*" Dustin's voice answered. "*I've reached Mirkwood.*"

"I'm almost at your position." Lucas rounded the corner and saw Dustin's flashlight from the distance. "I can see you. Over."

Once Lucas was near enough, Dustin greeted him, "Hey, man. Are you ready for this?"

"As ready as I can be," answered Lucas. He was scared shitless. He once again switched his Supercom's channel and announced, "The Ranger is with the Bard."

There was a sigh of relief from the other line. "*Awesome,*" said Will's voice. "*Commence Operation Save the King and Queen.*"

4. Talks

"So... why Save the King and Queen?" asked Dustin, breaking the silence.

He's been wandering the forest with Lucas for the past 30 minutes, without any progress so far. They've found a shoe, though, but it was too big to fit either Mike or Eleven.

"What do you mean *why*?" Lucas retorted, his nose crinkled. "Mike would've done the same for *any* of us!"

"I knew that!" he defended. "I meant, *why* those nicknames?"

"Oh." He looked down, kicking a stray rock, as he bit his bottom lip. "It just felt right," he answered, lifting his shoulder in a half shrug.

Dustin's brow furrowed. "Oh, but why not 'Save the Paladin and Mage' or something? We *are* using our Party nicknames, why break the chain?"

"Save the Paladin and Mage does *not* sound catchy," Lucas pointed out.

"Yeah, but it would've made sense."

"This makes sense too!"

"Okay, but *why*?"

Lucas let out a frustrated sigh, momentarily closing his eyes as he pinched the bridge of his nose in annoyance. "I told you, it just *felt* right."

"You're really not answering my question."

"Fine!" Lucas stopped walking and turned to face his friend. "Have you *seen* the way they look at each other?"

Dustin has, in fact, seen such instances. There was that look Mike had on his face when he saw Eleven wearing Nancy's dress, then how

they both looked at each when they left the cafeteria on that fateful day, and then there was that terrified look on Eleven's face when Mike ran to grab her at the science classroom.

Dustin didn't really like thinking about it because it was weird, and the feeling he got whenever he *did* think about it was weird, too.

"Oh, the one where they look like the sun shines out of the other's ass or something?" quipped Dustin.

"Exactly," Lucas pointed out. "They were made for each other."

Dustin snorted. "What?"

Lucas rolled his eyes and started walking again. Dustin raced after him.

"How could someone be made for someone else?" asked Dustin.

"It's a *metaphor*."

"Again, not answering my question."

Lucas face palmed rather comically. "I'm starting to regret not having Will come with us."

"Come on, I'm curious."

"Too bad you're not a cat, then."

"Wha—*hey*! I understood that reference, and I do *not* appreciate it!"

Lucas stuck his tongue out at him.

"Fine, I'll stop asking questions," sighed Dustin. "Didn't expect you to be such a bum and cut my curiosity voyage short."

Lucas rolled his eyes. "Don't be such a drama queen, and this isn't about science." Dustin made no move to retort, and Lucas sighed, deciding to cut him some slack. He began, "It's just... remember Penny?"

Dustin tilted his head. "The girl Mike had a crush on last year?"

"Yeah, that one."

"What about her?"

"She had a crush on Mike too," he revealed.

Dustin gasped. "Holy shit!"

"Quiet down!" admonished Lucas. He continued on, "Well, she made it kinda obvious, you know—well, I guess you actually don't know, you are kinda dense—but she always made moves on Mike. Like, uh, holding hands while walking to class, resting her head on his shoulder, stuff like that."

"And... your point?"

"Well, she kinda disappeared, right?"

"Yeah that's what usually happens when you move—"

"That's not what I meant!" Lucas rebuffed. He sighed. "I mean—that last week of school, she just suddenly stopped hanging with us."

"Oh, yeah, that did happen. Why?"

Lucas hesitated, pursing his lips, but continued, "Well, she kinda made a joke about you."

"Oh," said Dustin flatly. "What was the joke?"

"It involves your mom having to chew your food before you eat it..."

"Ah, a classic."

"That's not the point," continued Lucas. "Mike was mad, like *really* mad. He didn't talk to her for days, even when she apologized, saying she didn't mean it and stuff. Then Eleven pops up, literally sends me flying, but he defends her."

"Mike kinda shouted at her first," Dustin pointed out.

"Yeah, but he ended up *defending* her."

"Are you still sour about that or something?"

"No!" rebuffed Lucas. "My point *is*, Mike ended up *defending* her. If Penny did that, even if she did have a reason, he would've still cut her off; but it wasn't Penny, it was *Eleven*, and Mike defended her."

Dustin's eyes widened in understanding. "Ah, I see your point now," he acknowledged, nodding slowly. "But you could've just told me they had a crush on each other, though."

Lucas face palmed again.

"Fuck you, Byers, I've been waiting for almost two hours," Steve hissed as he saw Jonathan approach.

Jonathan panted as he rested his hands on his knees. He'd parked his car a few blocks away and had to run the rest of the distance to their meeting place. "I had to convince my mom I was *really* sleeping over tonight. Will told on me," he explained.

"Couldn't you just sneak out?"

"I wouldn't have had to if you hadn't bought me out on my brother," he argued.

Steve rolled his eyes. "You could've just told him the truth in the first place," he countered. "You think his gang isn't planning a little cruise like this to find Nancy's little brother? They were close, right?"

"Her brother's name is Mike," informed Jonathan.

"I knew that," he shot back. That bubble of insecurity was back. He swallowed it down.

"Thanks for waiting, by the way."

Steve looked at him weirdly, then said, "I still would've gone without you."

"But you didn't."

He looked away, resisting the urge to scowl at him. He moved to set his backpack on the floor, and proceeded to rummage through it.

"You brought stuff?" asked Jonathan.

"Of course, I did," Steve answered, looking up at him stupidly. "You didn't?"

"I have stuff, but I chunked it in a tree in the forest."

"What? Why?"

"Because it would look suspicious if I ran around town holding a bat with nails hammered in."

"Oh," said Steve flatly. He pulled out two flashlights from his bag. "Well, I didn't bring weapons, but I brought flashlights."

"Cool, thanks," Jonathan said, accepting the flashlight that Steve handed him. "Mine's batteries died last night."

Steve hopped up and stretched his shoulders. "Alright, let's do this," he said rather enthusiastically as he started doing toe-touches.

"What are you doing?"

"Stretching," answered Steve, who stopped doing toe-touches, and started jogging in place. "You know, warming up."

Jonathan raised a brow. "We're looking for a girl, not exercising," he said, incredulous.

"You don't... you don't stretch?" he asked, slowly stopping. He felt his cheeks warm, suddenly realizing how ridiculous he looked.

Jonathan shook his head, still looking at him incredulously.

There was an awkward silence, before Steve mumbled, "Okay, yeah, whatever..." He abruptly turned and walked into the forest.

Jonathan followed suit, turning on his flashlight.

It was silent for a while, with only the sounds of the leaves crunching

beneath them. Steve thought it was kind of cold, unconsciously thinking of how Nancy would be handling this temperature. She always did kind of like wearing his hoodies and jackets while they were dating. He would've found it annoying if he looked for it and wouldn't be able to find it, but he rather liked seeing her wearing his clothes. It made him feel fuzzy.

He was knocked out of his reverie by Jonathan's voice.

"I've covered the parts near the quarry," he reported, "but I didn't really see anything there. I was thinking maybe we'd search near the train tracks or something."

Steve pondered. "I don't think she'd be someplace open," he addressed. "I mean, if she's hiding, that is. She's not stupid—if she'd be hiding, she wouldn't be someplace recognizable, you know?"

Jonathan looked at him, stunned. "Y-Yeah, you make a point," he stammered. "So where do you think we start?"

"Let's go get your bat thing first."

"Oh, yeah. It's near over here." Jonathan made an abrupt turn, and approached a huge boulder. He climbed over it, tall enough to use the ledge as leverage, swinging his legs over to pull himself on top. He looked over at Steve and called, "You can stay down there, I'll be right back in like 2 minutes."

"Yeah, yeah," Steve answered, waving him off.

True enough, Jonathan sauntered back with a threatening nail bat.

"That thing's a beast," Steve acknowledged, looking at it with admiration.

"Thanks." Jonathan grinned. "So, where do we start?"

Steve's lips pursed. "The forest is pretty, uh... big," he offered lamely. "Do we split up?"

Jonathan's steps faltered. "I—uhm—don't think that's a pretty good idea," he said.

"What? Don't think I can handle myself?" Steve defended himself. "Just because you've been searching on your own first doesn't mean I can't do it myself, too."

"No, that's not the point!" Jonathan argued.

"Then why can't we split up then? We'd cover more ground that way," Steve pressed on, gesturing around him.

"Look, I can't really talk about why we can't split up. Just *trust* me, alright?"

"Trust *you*? You think I'd trust *you*?" Steve fumed, pointing an accusing finger at him. "You don't think I find it damn curious that the moment your little brother comes galivanting back into life, *Nancy* goes missing, after spending a day with you, of all people?"

Jonathan looked at him, bewildered. "What, you think it's *my* fault?" he spat. "You think this hell I've been living in since my brother disappeared is suddenly gone once he came back? Wouldn't that be the dream?" He laughed sarcastically, then stopped, eyeing Steve with wild eyes. "Well it's *not*. You think having a girlfriend disappear is bad? Well, you don't know the half of it."

Steve staggered, as if attacked by venom.

Jonathan exhaled shakily. "Sorry," he muttered. "We're both on edge, okay."

"Yeah," answered Steve timidly, not really trusting his voice.

"Besides," continued Jonathan, "if you didn't really trust me, you wouldn't have asked me in the first place... and if you're wondering, I trust you too. That's why I agreed, and I know you just wanna find *Nancy*. I'm sorry I didn't come to you in the first place. I know you've been hanging out outside their house ever since they disappeared."

Steve snapped his head towards him. "What?"

"It's where I first looked, you know. I went there straight after school, but you were already there, just... looking," Jonathan answered.

"Oh."

They were silent after that, then Steve sighed. "Okay, whatever, I'm sorry too." He looked over at Jonathan's curious expression and shrugged. "That's sincere, it just doesn't sound like it. I'm not good with apologies."

"Well, apology accepted."

"*Cleric to Ranger, do you copy?*" came Will's static-filled voice.

Lucas picked up his Supercom and answered, "Ranger here, I copy."

"*I think you'll be encountering a Dragon,*" said Will through the Supercom. "*He left a few minutes ago, and I think he's doing what you guys are doing, too.*"

Dustin groaned in the background, mumbling, "This was *not* part of the Quest description."

"Wasn't the Dragon talking to the Prince before we left the castle?" asked Lucas.

"An unlikely pair," quipped Dustin. Lucas sent him a disapproving look.

"*You're right,*" Will acknowledged. "*You think they'll be together?*"

"Guess they're doing Operation Save the Princess," said Dustin.

"*The Bard has a point,*" Will agreed.

Lucas nodded too. "I actually agree with him, too." There was a triumphant smile in Dustin's face. "What are we gonna do?"

"*If you ever do encounter the Dragon, tell me,*" answered Will. "*If he finds out that I know, he won't tell on you guys. The Monarch already gave him a hard time leaving because I told on him.*"

"Oh, so we won't die?" asked Dustin.

"Of course, we're not, dingus!" countered Lucas, harsher than intended.

"No, you guys won't die. Just be careful, and it's almost midnight, so better turn back, anyway. Over." The Supercom's static died down.

"I guess time's up," said Dustin.

"Yeah, let's get going. We can search again tomorrow."

"You think they're here, though?" asked Dustin.

Lucas looked at him, his expression softening. "I think so. I mean, it's where we first found Eleven," he answered. "And you had a point, it's the only place a fugitive would hide in here at Hawkins."

Dustin nodded, and they both continued walking back.

They were both wrapped up in a comfortable silence, before Dustin said, "You know, I'm actually really upset."

"What?" asked Lucas, surprised.

"I mean, we just got Will back," he explained, "and now Mike's gone. Then we had Eleven, then she's gone, too. Things aren't gonna be the same and it kinda makes me upset."

"Yeah, like we won't have Mike's basement to hang around in anymore," added Lucas.

"I can't believe his parents are *dead*," continued Dustin. "It just feels... *unreal*. I wonder how Mike's dealing with it, wherever—"

Lucas' hand clamped over Dustin's mouth. "Shush, do you hear that?" Lucas whispered.

There was a rustle.

Dustin's eyes widened, and he started swearing against Lucas' hand, "*Holy shit holy shit holy shit holy shit—*"

Lucas pulled him behind a tree, and clutched his wrist rocket against

his chest. Dustin quickly rummaged through his jacket pockets, and pulled out a small rock and handed it to him. He loaded it in his wrist rocket, and pulled on the strips as he turned and peered through the tree's low branches.

His heart raced as he spotted a silhouette looming across the trees from him. He aimed, which proved to be a bit hard because he was shaking really badly, and released—the shadow doubled over with a loud groan of pain, eventually dropping to the ground as he clutched between his legs.

"Yes!" Lucas quietly cheered.

"You got it?" asked Dustin from beside him.

"Hell, yeah, I did! It looked bad, so let's go see our catch."

They both stumbled over the leaves and twigs, following the moans of pain, and saw—

Steve Harrington was on the ground making obvious groans of pain. He was in a fetal position, with his eyes shut tight, and hands clutching his groin.

"You hit him *there*?" Dustin asked in a slightly amused tone.

Steve's eyes snapped open at their voice. "You!" he squeaked, still in distress. "Bloody kids! Couldn't have picked a better spot to hit!?" His voice was amusingly high pitched.

"Steve!?" came a voice behind them.

The kids turned and saw Jonathan with a nail bat.

"It was Lucas!" defended Dustin, pointing over at his friend.

"Hey!" Lucas slapped Dustin's hand away.

Jonathan approached them, eyes falling on Steve on the ground. "What the hell did you guys do? And what are you *doing*?"

"Lucas did that," Dustin said, still defending himself. "We're here on a

quest."

"A *what*?"

"A quest," he began to explain. "You know, like a mission."

"I think they know what quest means, Dustin," Lucas interrupted. "We're here to look for our friends."

"And we think you're here to look for your friend, too," Dustin added.

"*Couldn't do that without casualties?*" asked Steve, his voice still high pitched in pain. Jonathan pulled him up, but he couldn't stand up straight just yet. He was still doubled over, but at least he was on his feet.

"Sorry," Lucas and Dustin said together.

"We knew you were here," informed Lucas, "Will told us you left."

"What?" asked Jonathan, confused.

"We're communicating with Will through our Supercoms," Dustin explained, pointing at his microphone mouthpiece. "Which reminds me." He turned his Supercom on, switching the channel. "Bard to Cleric, do you copy?"

"*Cleric to Bard—I copy,*" came Will's voice.

Lucas motioned for Steve and Jonathan to keep their voices down, putting his index finger against his lips.

"We've encountered the Prince—" Steve smirked at that "—and the Dragon."

"Prince, huh?" asked Steve, still smirking as he looked at Lucas, his previous pain seemed to have been forgotten.

Lucas looked up at him with a crinkled nose, shaking his head in disapproval.

"Nice touch with the Dragon, too," Steve complimented, clearly still

amused. Jonathan scowled at him. "Has a nice right to it—kinda feisty, this one."

"*I knew it*," said Will from the Supercom. "*Tell the Dragon that—*"

A screeching nose erupted from the Supercom, which made Dustin rip his headpiece off, throwing it to ground. Everyone else made a move to clutch their ears closed. It went on for 30 seconds, until it made an abrupt stop.

"What the hell was that?" asked Steve, his ears still ringing. He approached Dustin's headpiece, which was smoking, on the ground with caution.

"Shit, I think I'm—" Dustin yelled, then sighed in relief. "Never mind, my ear drums are fine." He looked over at his headpiece, then groaned. "Oh man, it's fried." He picked it up and brought it at his face's height. "It's a goner," he lamented, facing Lucas with a crestfallen expression.

"You can use your old one," he said. He whipped out his own Supercom, and turned it on.

"Has this happened before?" asked Jonathan, approaching Dustin. He bent his knees to get a closer look on his headpiece. "You can try having it checked at the Radio Shack."

"No, this is the first time," answered Dustin. "It was kinda like when the Heathkit imploded."

"Ranger to Cleric, do you copy?" said Lucas' frantic voice in the background. "Cleric, do you copy?"

There was only static.

"Something's intercepting the signal," Lucas informed them. "I can't get a hold on Will."

"My old Supercom's at home," said Dustin. He turned to face the two teenagers. "Does any of you happen to have a Realistic TRC-214?"

"What the hell is that?" asked Steve, face scrunching in confusion.

"It's their walkie talkie," answered Jonathan. Steve gave him a look, and he only shrugged in response.

There was a sound of a car engine revving close by.

"Holy shit," mumbled Dustin, as all their heads snapped at the direction.

"Crap," added Lucas.

"I think we gotta go," declared Steve, grabbing Dustin by his backpack with his left hand; and grabbing Lucas' arm with his right. "Whoever's roaming a forest at midnight doesn't sound good."

Steve bolted, pulling Dustin and Lucas along, with Jonathan following suit.

5. Save the Queen

November 12, 1983

Eleven woke with a gasp.

She coughed up goo, the puss spilling over her cheeks and neck.

A deafening growl filled her ears, and she turned to see the Demogorgon shifting, crawling towards Mike's unconscious form. She could have killed it, disintegrated it, but she held back, for the sake of Mike, because she didn't know if he would be able to survive it, having gotten dragged into the mess.

She raised her arm, albeit weakly, and mustered up all the strength she could gather and threw the monster back to the wall. It slammed against the cement, and dropped to the floor, appearing stunned.

"Mike!" she shouted as loud as she could, but he didn't move.

He had to get out of here, away from the danger. Away from the monster.

"MIKE!" she shouted, louder this time, but he still didn't move. She wanted to move him, but knew she couldn't, because her mind was on overdrive—she wouldn't be able to do it gently, and whipping him around with her powers might hurt him.

The Demogorgon let out another deafening growl, and she snapped her head towards it. It faced her, then started inching towards her, when she got the idea. She'd lure the monster away from Mike.

She stood on shaky legs, facing the monster with grim determination. She felt blood trickling down her nose, and she wiped it away with her sleeve. She raised her arm again, towards the monster, once again mustering up all the strength she could, and whipped it to the wall behind her. The sound of the cement cracking from the force resonated through the halls.

Eleven eyed the worn-down glass doors down the halls, leading outside the building. She turned to face the monster, which let out

another mighty growl, the five sides of its hideous face opening, giving her full view of its teeth-laden mouth. It stretched its bony arms, lifting itself up, its sharp fingers leaving cracks on the wall.

Eleven staggered backwards from the growl, fear crawling up her spine. She'd made the monster angry. She turned and gave a mad dash towards the glass doors. The monster, screeching, raced towards her, its bony arms still outstretched, ready to snatch her up if it got the chance.

Once she was close enough to the doors, she raised both arms, still running, and willed for the glass to shatter. It did, and she ran through, not stopping when she heard the fabric of the shirt she was wearing rip when she caught on a particularly sharp piece of glass sticking from the door frame, puncturing her arm and leaving a great gash. It was better, she thought, since blood drew the monster to her—away from Mike.

What she didn't anticipate, however, was when another monster jumped in front of her—but it looked different. When the monster that was chasing her stood like a man would, this was on all fours, like a dog, but both still had its trademark face that opened in five sides.

She gasped, abruptly stopping. She turned to run back, but saw the other monster closing in on her. In a fit of desperation, she turned back towards the new monster, and lifted her arms towards it. It started to float, with its bony legs flailing around. She heard the other monster growl behind her, closer this time, and she whipped her arm to throw the new monster towards the older one.

It squealed when it hit contact with the Demogorgon.

"*Eleven!*" she heard Mike's loud, but muffled voice from inside the building.

Both monsters snapped their hideous face towards the direction where Mike's voice came from, and Eleven gasped.

"Mike," she whispered harshly, heart in her throat. It was like all the terror in the world lodged its way to her when she saw both monsters

make a move towards the direction of Mike's voice.

Blood started trickling down Eleven's ears, a force so powerful seeming to envelop her. She didn't even notice that her feet weren't touching the ground anymore. For a moment, it was like she had tunnel vision—her eyes focused on both monsters, still trying to disentangle themselves.

She lifted her arm, which felt so hot—like fire was making its way through the veins on her wrist until it came out of her fingertips—it was trembling. She held her focus on the two monsters, willing, and watching as the five sides of their faces opened tremendously, their teeth-laden mouth up in the sky. It looked like they were *screaming* for their lives, but not a single sound escaped their mouths.

Slowly, a black stain made itself know on each of their chests, until it grew and grew, and soon, both monsters were writhing, clawing at their own bodies, drawing gashes into their own grey, marble-like skin. She watched as the monsters fell, the Demogorgon first, in a heap on the ground, soon disintegrated into a small mountain of ash.

She had burned them from the inside out.

And then she crashed, the last thing she remembered seeing being the purple skies of the Upside Down.

An indefinite number of days later

For the second time, Eleven woke with a gasp.

She choked on goo, immediately sitting up to cough and spit it out. "M-Mike," she tried to yell out in between bouts of cough.

She looked around her surroundings, finding herself still in front of the school, but it was eerily quiet—the only sound she could hear being her own ragged breaths. "Mike," she tried to shout again, but it came out raspy and only near above a breathy whisper. Her throat constricted as she stood on her shaky legs, almost falling over before she used her arms to push herself up from the ground.

Trembling, she wobbled over to the school as fast as she could, a whine of panic forming in her head. "Mike!" she shouted, and it came

out louder this time, as she limped through the halls of the school as fast she could.

Her jaw clenched tighter and tighter with each passing second, until she reached the spot where she had woken up in before, where she had last seen him—evident by the gaping hole in the wall left by the Demogorgon—and it felt like all the wind has been knocked out of her.

Mike wasn't there.

She wasn't in the school anymore. She didn't even know where she was.

But she was running now, the ends of the many-sizes-too-large flannel shirt she was wearing billowing behind her like a cape. "Mike!" she called out desperately, in her adrenaline-lined voice. It was shaky and scratchy, but loud, which was all that mattered to her at the moment.

Every step she took in the Upside Down version of the forest produced a sickening squelching sound, and she could feel the goo from the ground splash on the skin of her legs—it felt cold.

She found herself in the quarry, where she had saved Mike from when he had stupidly jumped off the ledge—or, at least, she had saved him in the Right-side Up.

She peered down the cliff, and shuddered when she saw the inky-black water, a thunder of fear quickly climbing up her spine. It reminded her of The Void, and she staggered backwards until she accidentally tripped on a stray twig that caught on her foot, making her land on her butt with another loud squelch.

Her bottom lip trembled, and her face was beginning to crumple—but she interrupted herself by taking a deep breath. She didn't want to cry now. She stood up on shaky knees, pushing herself off the ground, and once again scanned her surroundings. It was quiet, and it scared her more than it reassured her. She didn't know what else laid hidden in this place.

Taking a deep breath, she shouted, "Mike!" Her voice came out frantic and desperate, and she felt her heart thumping against her ribcage, threatening to break free.

But, again, no one answered back.

Breathing hard, she once again looked around in disbelief. A buzzing sound made itself known, but it seemed to come from everywhere. With each second that passed, it grew in volume, until it became a high-pitched squeal. Her hands made its way up to cover her ears, attempting to block out the sound, but to no avail.

Slowly, slowly, she sank to her knees, her head throbbing, and blood dripping from her nose and ears, staining the hands that covered it. She hadn't even noticed that she was shouting, until she had to stop because her throat grew sore from overuse.

But then—

"Eleven!"

With a gasp, the buzzing stopped. She whipped her head up so fast, it floated for a bit.

"Nancy!"

She knew that voice, how couldn't she? Even if he didn't say her name, she heard it.

"El! Nancy!"

"Mike!" she tried to shout back, voice raspy, and throat burning.
"Mike!"

"Nancy! Where are you?"

The voice seemed to fade out, and she realized that it must be getting farther away from her.

"Mike," she sobbed out, incapable of raising the volume of her voice anymore. Tears were freely flowing out of her eyes, and she hadn't even realized when she started crying.

A second passed, and the voice was no longer there.

"Mike," she whispered again. She tried to push herself off the ground, but her arms failed on her, and she flopped back on the goo-covered ground with a *squelch*. The bleeding of her nose had stopped, but she could still feel the familiar warmth on her upper lip.

Another second passed, and her heart seized at the sickening silence of the Upside Down.

She was alone.

Another indefinite number of days later

Eleven was... she didn't even know *what* to call whatever she felt.

For the past few days, she only cried, only stopping to finally stand on her shaky legs to go and find an acceptable shelter. Unconsciously, she made her way to the Wheeler's house; first going into the basement, where she tried to build her own blanket fort when she saw that the one Mike made wasn't there, then gave up when she *couldn't*; then, she decided to just settle in what was supposed to be Mike's room, but the Upside-Down-version.

She finally stopped crying just a few hours ago, which left a sort of empty and hollow, but at the same time heavy, feeling in her chest. Her eyes, which had been puffy the past few days because of her crying, even started to get better, and she opened them wide to examine the interior of the Upside-Down-version of Mike's room.

Small toys were strewn about the floor, and she remembered wincing when she stepped on a weird block-resembling one, the table with the trophies near the door were covered in a thick layer of a mix of dirt and goo, and the poster positioned on top of it, pinned on the wall, was completely unrecognizable, the colors either faded out or horrendously covered in dirt.

It looked like a sand storm ravaged the room, but the gentle familiarity was oddly comforting for her.

Yet another indefinite number of days later

Eleven knew what hunger felt like.

Whatever she was going through now was *not* hunger.

She gasped as another stab of pain shot below her stomach. Groaning, she folded into herself more. She clenched on the fabric of the blue flannel she was wearing, wrapping it to herself tightly.

Her forehead was covered in a sheen of sweat, trailing down under her eyes, and on her upper lip. She didn't even notice herself shaking, too preoccupied with the almost consuming pain below her stomach. She curled into herself, her breaths coming out in gasps.

Another stab of pain.

She groaned, louder now, teeth clenched, eyes shut as tears threatened to leak from it. She inhaled sharply as the pain seemed to subside for a moment, only for it to come back as it was before, if not worse.

She forced her body to shift, both knees holding herself up, her arms around her lower stomach—another stab of pain—and she pushed her head onto the worn-out mattress of Mike's Upside-Down-version room, trying to block it out and failing. She rocked her body back and forth in instinct.

Unwilling, a sob broke free. She didn't want it to hurt anymore.

6. Home

A/N: Hi, all! I've made slight timeline changes in the previous chapters, because I figured that my initial plan was kind of confusing. Everything's linear now.

Eleven was back in the forest.

She was lost.

She panicked.

She had woken up with the sheets red with blood, *her* blood. She could still feel the stickiness between her legs, and the pain on her lower abdomen felt dull because of the adrenaline coursing through her.

The sight of blood would have only left her heart thumping against her chest, but the ominous sound of stomping in the distance was what sent her running.

She trudged through the forest, hands firmly clutched on the worn-out blue flannel around her. Her head was pounding, armpits and forehead sweaty despite the cold, she could feel her socks slick with goo inside her shoes, and the muck under her fingernails. She felt disgusting, and for a hot second, she kind of missed the obsessive cleanliness of the lab.

Her eyebrows crinkled, surprised of her own thoughts. She wanted to scream or cry.

"Run! Run! Hurry!"

Eleven stopped at her tracks, eyes widening. She quickly whipped her head around, trying to find the source of the voice.

"Any of you little shits get caught, I'm gonna kill you!"

She wildly scanned the trees around her with her eyes.

"This is the fastest I can go!"

A gasp escaped her throat. She knew that voice.

"I dropped my wrist rocket!"

She knew that voice, too.

"Forget it! Let's go!"

And that.

Heart in her throat, she tried to follow where the voices were coming from, letting instinct take over.

"Fuck! Get up!"

She took a left, barely missing a branch.

"He has—he has—wait!"

She jumped over a large root.

"Let him breathe! Let him—"

"I'm f-fine!"

Eleven skidded over a puddle of goo.

"Let's go!"

She halted in front of large tree.

"Wait! Are you okay?"

"We don't have time for this!"

"I'm fine, it was a false alarm."

The voices sounded the clearest at the tree.

"Fuck you, dude."

It almost sounded like they were there beside her.

Hopeful, and a little bit hesitant, she called, "Lucas?"

A second of silence.

"*Did you—*"

"*Hey, dipshits!*"

"*I heard—*"

A sound of ruffling.

"*Let's fucking go!*"

Muffled sounds of arguing.

Then frantic steps.

Then silence.

She let out a shaky breath, then reached her arm out, tracing her trembling fingers against the bark of the tree in front of her. Its warmth felt foreign against the cold temperature of the Upside Down, and when she rested her whole hand against it, she felt it *pulsate*.

She brought her other hand to rest against the tree, then proceeded to prod on where it pulsed the most, running her hands against the rough bark. She followed it to the other side of the tree, going lower and lower, until...

Her eyes caught sight of a small—almost like a speck, really—spot of glimmer. It was right against a large root, and was almost covered in goo and dirt. She knelt on the ground beside it, hands hovering above the spot. She could feel the warmth radiate from it. It felt familiar. Her heart thumped against her chest, almost like it was escaping from her, almost like it wanted to go through the small, glowing, spot.

She stood back up, and took a few steps back. She raised her arm, hand pointed in the direction of the small spot of glimmer, then

willed for it to open, eyes focused and teeth clenched.

Slowly, the spot grew, until it was big enough for her head to fit in.

With a gasp, Eleven doubled over then immediately threw up. It left a sour taste in her mouth. She looked back to the glowing hole, eyes watering from nausea.

It was slowly getting smaller.

Still doubled over, with her left arm clutching her stomach, she lifted her right arm up and willed for the hole to halt. She straightened herself, tried to compose herself, and began to will it bigger again, and it grew, but the ground was pushing against it.

She walked towards it, arm still outstretched in front of her, willing, almost *begging* for it to get bigger, and it was finally big enough for her to squeeze in, and she did, almost diving in it head-first, clawing her way against the membrane-like substance thing that coated it, sinking, sinking...

And then suddenly she was climbing.

Climbing onto the ground.

Blindly, her hand grasped on a loose root, and she pulled, like it was rope, pulling and pulling until she felt herself *pop* out of the hole.

She rolled and faced up, and saw a dark, purple-less sky, and it had *stars*, and she could even see the *moon*. She felt dry dirt against her head, and she inhaled, and then she could literally *smell* the forest, and it never smelled so *good*.

Then she felt sick.

Then a blinding pain shot through her lower abdomen.

Then she felt the weird wave of hot and warm.

She sat up, then threw up again, all over herself. She felt, and probably even looked, disgusting.

Another blinding pain, and she fell on her side, hugging herself.

She groaned through clenched teeth.

There was a shout, but she heard it muffled.

She saw a light in the distance.

Another shout, and the voice sounded familiar. She couldn't quite place who it was.

So, she said whoever came into her mind first.

"Mike," she tried to call out, but it came out as a whisper.

Another sort-of muffled shout.

Black spots in her vision.

Rough, gentle hands.

Then nothing.

"Oh my god," was all Nancy could say.

Before her, laid out on a blanket and towel-covered tabletop, was a very noticeably dirt, grime, blood, and vomit-covered Eleven.

Hopper came back five hours after he left, and Mike has fallen asleep. Nancy couldn't sleep.

"You found her like this?"

"Yeah."

"Unconscious?"

"I found her barely conscious—in pain—fainted just as I got to her."

"Oh my god."

"I'm worried about the blood more than anything else."

"It's hers."

"How do you know?"

"It's—she's on her period, it's obvious."

"Oh."

Hopper never had to deal with that. Sara died before she got her period.

"How old is she?"

"Probably around 12."

"Then it must be her first."

"Oh."

They both went silent, too stunned at the sight and condition of the girl in front of them. She stirred, and they both held their breaths, but Eleven remained unconscious.

"Do we wake her up?" asked Nancy, unsure.

"Probably, get her to eat something, clean up."

"She seems out of it, though."

"She just moved, it's fine."

They both went silent again, waiting for the other to talk.

Finally, Nancy said, "It's probably best if I help her."

Hopper hesitated, remembering Nancy's prior condition, but then he also remembered that he had no idea how to take care of girls past the age of 8.

"Yeah," he agreed.

"How about Mike?" asked Nancy, glancing towards the closed door of his room.

"He'll only freak out when he sees what she looks like."

Nancy only nodded. She made her way to Eleven, and gently placed a hand to rest against the girl's forehead. She looked even more terrible up-close, and Nancy's heart constricted at the thought of what she had to face. She ran her thumb gently across her forehead. Eleven's brows crinkled.

"Eleven," Nancy whispered.

Her head whipped abruptly to the side, causing Nancy to retract her hand. The girl's face looked distressed, but still asleep.

"Hey," Nancy whispered again, gently beckoning her to wake up. She reached her hand up to Eleven's forehead again, and her eyelids finally fluttered open, although barely.

Then Eleven turned her head to face Nancy and she gasped, immediately sitting up, eyes widened.

Nancy raised her arms, as if in surrender. Hopper stayed at the back, leaning against the wall, not wanting to disrupt. Guilt was eating at him, then suddenly she looked straight at him, and he had to look away.

Eleven then looked back at Nancy, confused.

Nancy stared back at her, arms slowly going back down as she saw the girl relatively calm.

Eleven then scanned the rest of place, face growing more distressed at each turn.

"Eleven," called Nancy.

She snapped her head to face her. "Mike," she said.

"He's asleep," Nancy answered, nodding her head towards the direction of the closed door.

Then Eleven's shoulders tensed, and she made a move to climb out of the tabletop. Nancy jumped and stepped towards her, then held onto

her shoulders to stop her.

"No, don't."

Eleven snapped her head towards her direction, eyes desperate.

"You have to—" Nancy tried to begin.

"Mike," she interrupted in her small, scratchy voice.

"He's—"

"Please."

Hopper watched from his position, almost amused. Nancy looked at him, silently asking for help, and he only gave her a small nod. "She won't stop," he said, as if it was enough of a reason. He knew it wasn't, but the girl was battered, and she wanted to see the boy, so they might as well let her.

Nancy looked back at Eleven, then relented. She looked as if she was about to cry. "Let me help you get off the table, okay?" She held her hand out and Eleven grasped it, allowing her weight onto it, until she felt the ground hit her feet.

"I'll go wake him up," said Nancy, making a move to walk.

But Eleven was already walking towards his room.

"Or you do that," she mumbled, watching Eleven's back.

Eleven opened the door, and she saw him.

Mike, sprawled on top of the bed, which was bare from blankets. He still even had his shoes on. When she walked closer, she noticed his brows furrowed, and his fists clenched, and her heart suddenly jumped in her throat, and then there were tears in her eyes.

"Mike," she whispered, voice unwilling to go louder.

But he heard it, nonetheless, and his eyes snapped open, and he sat up, eyes immediately flying to meet hers.

There was a moment.

Then it all suddenly crashed into place.

"El," he whispered.

Then he pushed himself out of the bed, just as Eleven started to run, and they met halfway, clutching each other, falling to their knees on the wooden floor.

"Mike," she whispered, her knuckles white with the grip she had on his jacket.

Mike moved to properly sit on the floor, sprawling his legs out, as Eleven adjusted to sit on his lap, facing him. She was sobbing, crying, clutching his jacket, and Mike welcomed it, his arms around her waist, not even minding in the slightest her state.

His bottom lip trembled, as he tried to hug her closer, but she pulled on his jacket almost frantically, and he pulled away, confused, which only made her pull harder, and he inched closer, trying to comprehend what she wanted.

She pulled on his jacket again, looking up to face him, closer to him, and pulled again, until she was pulling on the collar of his hoodie, and Mike had to look down at her, and she leaned in to him, closer and closer, until she pressed her lips onto Mike's, because she remembered him doing it to her and it felt *nice* and she wanted to feel nice.

It worked.

Pulling back, Eleven finally moved to wrap her arms around Mike, tucking her head against his chest. She was crying, sobbing, but she was smiling now, because Mike was *here*, and it was all that she wanted, maybe even needed.

Mike pulled her closer, stunned from the sudden kiss, but it only made him *miss* her more.

"You're real," he whispered, almost dazed. "You're here. You're real."

"Mike," she said, sobbing. "Don't go."

Mike wasn't even confused with her statement, it only made him hold onto her tighter. He let out a watery laugh. "I'm not going anywhere."

Mike stared at Eleven, who was finally clean and sleeping on Mike's bed. Nancy had to pry her away from him, and she would only take a bath if Mike was in sight, so he had brought a chair inside the bathroom, and sat there with his back turned to her.

While Eleven took a bath, Nancy instructed Hopper to buy some sanitary pads for Eleven. He came back with too much of them. Mike made a move to leave the bathroom as Nancy thought her how to use it, but Eleven whined and Mike had to stay through it, his face growing hotter by the second.

After the bath, she nibbled on a piece of toast (Mike would've given her Eggos, but he worried that she would have wolfed it quickly rather than eat it slowly). She was swaying on her seat by this time, and she practically passed out when she reached Mike's bed.

Tired, Nancy fell asleep on the couch.

Placing a chair just beside his bed, Mike took his place and watched Eleven.

"Kid," he heard Hopper call him from outside.

He turned and saw Hopper peek inside the room. He raised his brows when Hopper beckoned him to come outside, but he did anyway. Hopper invited him to sit in the small dining area, and Mike did. He leaned forward on the table, expectant.

"What?" he asked.

"I know you have some questions. Might as well shoot 'em."

"Oh..." Mike trailed off. To be honest, he hadn't even thought of it, his mind too preoccupied with the fact that Eleven was *here*, that he hadn't thought about how she got here. "Well... how?"

"I saw her right by a tree. She was barely conscious."

"I mean, how?"

"That's what I'm tryna to figure out myself, to be honest. I've been through that area about five times tryna follow these pesky kids, then I see her."

"What?"

Pesky kids—Mike knew exactly who Hopper was talking about.

"What do you mean, what?" Hopper narrowed his eyes.

"In the condition you found her..." Mike's heart dropped.

"What are you on about?"

"Maybe she was in the Upside Down *this whole time*?"

Hopper looked at Mike, stunned, then looked at the door that led to the room Eleven was sleeping in, then leaned back in his chair.
"That's impossible..."

"We're talking about *Eleven*."

"She's a little girl..."

"She's *Eleven*, she's not some little girl."

Hopper couldn't argue with that logic. "That would explain the state I found her in."

"I have one more question."

"What?"

"How did she get to the forest?"

Hopper's head snapped towards Mike. "Well, shit."

"You don't think so, do you?"

Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Hop—"

"I'll check on your friends in the morning."

"Thanks."

Mike fell back into his chair. He shyly looked up at Hopper, opening his mouth to ask a question, hesitated, then closed it again.

Hopper watched him. "Spit it out, kid."

"What do we do now?"

"We wait. Anything else?"

"There's one more thing..."

"What?"

"I want you to teach me."

"Teach you what?"

"How to use a gun."

Will Byers let out a yawn. He was sitting on the porch steps of his house, waiting for the chief to come and pick him up. He had stayed up late waiting for Lucas and Dustin to go and call him on the Supercom, almost panicking when the signal got cut off. When Jonathan arrived around 2am, he bombarded him with questions.

"They're fine," Jonathan told him.

"They're not picking up their Supercoms," Will argued.

"Steve and I brought them both home," his brother continued to reassure him. "They weren't even caught."

That was when he relented and went to bed.

Seeing Hopper's familiar van in the distance, Will hopped off the porch steps and trudged his way to the car.

"Morning, Hop!" he greeted as he sat down on the passenger seat.

"Morning, kid," he greeted back. He had an unlit cigarette between his lips. "How are your friends?"

Will tensed up, his mouth opening and closing, trying to find coherent words. "I, uhm, uh—"

"Yeah. Thought so."

"They, uh—" Will stammered.

"Don't do it again."

Will paled, then nodded.

Hopper looked at him. "Good." He diverted his attention back on the road, and started driving towards the school.

The Byers' residence was nearer the edge of town, so the trip took a solid 20 minutes. The whole drive was silent, as Will spent the entire time looking down, guilty. Soon enough, they've arrived, and as Will was about to step out of the car, Hopper told him, "It's alright, kid. Can't blame you for wanting to find your friends. Just don't do it again."

Will smiled. "Thanks, Hop." He got out of the car.

By the bike racks, he saw Lucas and Dustin, who has just arrived.

"Guys!" he called after them.

Lucas heard him first. "Will!"

Dustin swiveled. "We have A/V Club today."

They all looked at each other, waiting for the other to say it.

Finally, Dustin said, "I vote we skip it."

It was 3:30 in the afternoon, and Dustin, Lucas, and Will were all behind the bleachers.

"The line just went quiet," Will explained.

"You didn't hear anything else?" asked Dustin.

"No."

Dustin's brows crinkled, and he leaned back, resting his back against the bleachers.

Lucas chewed on his bottom lip. "So that was just in the forest."

"What was?" asked Will.

"When the signal got cut off, there was a loud, sort-of screeching noise," Lucas told him. "It was bad. It fried Dustin's earpiece, so we thought it was related to the Supercoms."

"Then what happened?"

"We heard a car, then we all kinda freaked out."

"A car?" asked Will, incredulous. "What's a car doing near the forest at, what, 12 midnight?"

"Trouble," quipped Dustin, "or that's what the *Prince* said."

"We ran," continued Lucas. "Then... there's something else." He looked at them both pointedly. "What I'm about to say is serious, alright? I'm not making this up."

"Just say it," urged Dustin.

Lucas took a deep breath, leaned forward, then whispered, "I heard Eleven."

Will blinked. Dustin stared at him.

"That was when I thought you were getting an asthma attack—" he looked at Dustin "—by that tree, remember?"

Will blinked again, unable to comment. Dustin nodded, remembering the memory.

"What did she say?" Dustin asked.

"My name."

"Just your name?"

"Yeah," answered Lucas. He exhaled. "I'm not making this up."

Will looked at Dustin, then at Lucas. "We believe you."

Lucas looked at him appreciatively. "What do you think it means?"

"That she's okay?" offered Dustin. "But she's probably in the Upside Down."

A hand came flying to hit Dustin on the shoulder.

"Dude! What the hell!" Lucas yelled at him, vaguely pointing at Will.

Will had to resist the urge to roll his eyes. "I'm not gonna cry whenever someone mentions the Upside Down," he told them. "But Dustin's probably right. She might even be doing a lot better than me in there."

"Yeah, with her powers and stuff," added Dustin.

"What about Mike?"

They all went silent.

Then Will remembered something.

"Wait, you told me you heard a car, right?" he asked them both.

"Yeah," answered Lucas.

"It was Hopper."

"Shit, are you serious?" Dustin gasped, face contorted in fear.

"Positive. He talked to me a while ago morning."

"What did he tell you?" asked Lucas.

"He knows you guys were snooping around in the forest last night," he told them.

"Fuck," muttered Dustin, hiding his face in his hands. "We're screwed."

"No, we're not," said Will, reassuring him. "He said it was fine, but to not do it again."

"He let us off the hook?" asked Lucas incredulously. "This is the *chief* we're talking about, right?"

"He didn't seem mad," Will countered. "We would know if he was mad."

"Doesn't he seem a bit weird?" Dustin asked them both, chin in his hand. "He isn't going on about Mike and Nancy missing like he was when you went missing."

Will looked at him, then said, "What do you mean?"

Lucas gasped. "You're right!" He looked at Will, and explained, "When you went missing, he went all big city cop and arranged, like, a ton of search parties and stuff. It was this big operation, and he oversaw all of it."

"Yeah, I think he barely slept," supplied Dustin. "It's kinda weird how he isn't going all crazy over Mike and Nancy's case."

"Is he in charge of the case?" asked Will.

"Yeah," answered Lucas, "my dad went by the station the other day."

"Why do you think he's acting like that?" asked Will again, almost piecing something together.

Lucas chewed on his bottom lip, then hesitantly said, "Do you think he cares enough?"

"Hey!" Will felt like he needed to defend Hopper, at least. "It's Hop. Of course, he cares."

Lucas brought both his arms up, in surrender.

"Well..." Dustin began. "What if he knows something?"

"About what?" Lucas urged on.

They all went quiet, as silent realization dawned on them.

Finally, Will answered, "About Mike and Nancy."

Jonathan Byers was kind of weirded out.

Throughout the day, he had caught Steve Harrington looking at him way too many times. He didn't think he even looked at Nancy that much, too. At the end of Philosophy class, Steve was even by the door, waiting for him. Jonathan was the last to leave the room.

"Byers," he called.

"Yeah?"

"Last night..."

"I don't think we should do it again."

At that same moment, a freshman girl passed by and heard the small part of their conversation. Her steps slightly faltered when she saw that it was Steve Harrington, the presumed *king* of Hawkins High.

Steve looked horrified. "Oh, no!"

The girl blinked, then she beamed as she moved to point at the rainbow pattern of her shirt. She then turned and continued to walk away.

Steve was left gaping.

Jonathan looked indifferent.

"What the—" Steve began.

Jonathan interrupted him. "It's fine."

"That didn't bother you?"

"Worse things have happened to me," he shrugged. "We shouldn't talk about this here, though."

"I didn't say we shouldn't look for her!" Jonathan argued.

Jonathan and Steve were by the bleachers, because apparently, that's where people went to talk about private matters.

"Then what?" asked Steve, incredulous.

Jonathan pinched the bridge of his nose. "I felt something."

"What?"

"I don't expect you to understand, but—"

"But what—"

"Look," Jonathan began, looking at Steve pointedly. "When my brother went missing, the chief and my mom didn't just find him at some random place."

"What's this gotta do with Nan—"

"Let me finish!" he yelled. Jonathan took in a deep breath to calm himself down, then continued, "Like I said, we didn't just find him at some random place. It was at a—" he almost hesitated—"a different dimension."

Steve looked at him stupidly, then spat, "Oh, fuck you, Byers."

"I'm serious!" he countered. "I know—I know I *look* and *sound* crazy, but I don't make this shit up. I *know* how hard it is to believe this. I didn't—I didn't believe my mom at first, too."

Steve had to look away from him, then leaned against the bleachers.

"When—When Nancy came to me—"

Steve whipped around to look at him. "What?"

"When Nancy came to me," Jonathan continued, "I almost didn't believe her, too."

7. New Party Members

A/N: Short 1k chapter... that doesn't at all make up for that months worth of silence :(

Steve leaned back against the bleachers again, then slid down until he was sitting on the grass.

He scoffed, almost in disbelief, then he remembered Nancy freaking out about how Barbara was missing, and at that time, Jonathan's little brother was missing, too, and maybe that was somehow connected?

Steve turned to look at Jonathan, who looked almost regretful, and it kind of annoyed him. "What else haven't you told me?"

So, Jonathan sat on the ground beside Steve Harrington, telling him the story of how Nancy approached him with his picture of Barbara, how he and Nancy went looking for her in the forest, how Nancy got stuck in that *place* for a while, how he and Nancy fought that *thing* that took his little brother and killed Barbara at his house, how Nancy freaked out when it disappeared, how she raced out to go find Mike, and how it was the last time he saw her.

"She was at your place the night she disappeared?" Steve asked.

"Yeah."

"I was gonna go there," he confessed. He looked away, almost ashamed. "I was—I could have *helped*—I could have—"

"You didn't know," Jonathan consoled, trying to comfort him. "It was better that you didn't, so you wouldn't get dragged into the mess, too."

"Shit," Steve muttered, burying his face in his hands. "Just how big is this?"

Jonathan pushed himself off the ground, and offered his hand out, which Steve took to pull himself up.

Steve turned to look at him, but something far behind caught his eye. He squinted, then asked, "Is that your brother?"

Jonathan turned and, right enough, his little brother was a few meters behind them. "I thought they had A/V Club today."

"Doesn't look like A/V Club to me," quipped Steve. "Looks like a pretty serious discussion, though." He made a move to walk towards them, but Jonathan pulled his arm back. "What?"

Instead of answering him, Jonathan pushed past Steve and walked towards the kids.

"Well, fine, you go first, then," Steve muttered behind him. "Damn sibling drama..."

"Will?" Jonathan called out.

The boy whipped his head around. "Jonathan?"

"I thought you guys had A/V Club?"

"We skipped!" Dustin perked from beside Will.

Lucas clamped a hand on his mouth. "Shut up, dude!"

In retaliation, Dustin flicked his hand away and set him a glare. "What? They're cool!" he countered. "We were with them last night."

Ignoring his two friends, Will stood up and face Jonathan, after eyeing the person he was with. "What are you guys doing here?"

"We could ask you the same question," Steve countered from behind Jonathan.

"Are you guys best friends now?" Lucas asked in the background.

Steve rolled his eyes. "More than best friends, according to some girl."

Lucas gaped.

"It was a joke," Steve said flatly.

Beside Lucas, Dustin blinked.

Jonathan ignored the three of them, and answered Will, "We had to talk about something."

"We did, too," said Will. "Hopper knows."

"What?"

"Hopper knows. About you guys snooping in the forest."

Steve pushed past Jonathan, and looked at Will pointedly. "The hell did you say?"

"He says it's fine, just don't do it again," reassured Will, unfazed with Steve's urgency.

Steve sighed and returned to his spot behind Jonathan. "I agree with you now," he told him, slapping his shoulder. "No more searching at night."

"What?" Lucas complained. "Why not?"

"Have you not been listening to me?" Will argued, annoyed. "Hopper knows."

"There's something else," said Jonathan.

"What?" asked Dustin. The kids all looked at Jonathan expectantly.

"I think I, you know... felt it," answered Jonathan. "The *thing*, the..."

"The Demogorgon?" Dustin finished.

Jonathan blinked, then nodded. Behind him, Steve sort-of looked confused, but he caught on after a few seconds.

"But we have to keep looking!" Lucas argued. "I heard El!"

"How did you *feel* the Demogorgon?" Will asked from his spot, though he looked a little spooked.

"The Demogorgon's dead!" Lucas continued, still looking a bit of

annoyed and angry. "El and Mike probably killed it! I *heard* her!"

"But what if it isn't?" Dustin asked, almost hesitantly. He looked at Lucas pointedly.

"That's impossible."

Jonathan flayed his arm out to silence the kids. "Look," he declared pointedly, "I know what I felt. If you were there—" he looked at Will "—you'd know, too."

Steve shifted behind him, he looked confused as hell. "Sorry to interrupt, but who the fuck is El?"

"She's our friend," Dustin unhelpfully supplied. He then looked back at Jonathan. "Okay, where exactly did you *feel* the Demogorgon?"

"By a tree," Jonathan answered. "Where you had to stop for a while to breathe, remember?"

A look of understanding washed across Dustin's features. "That's where Lucas heard El, too."

"Then you must've felt her instead of the Demogorgon," said Lucas, still unsatisfied with the prospect of not being able to look for their friends anymore.

"But how can you *feel* the Demogorgon?" repeated Will. Everyone else spotted a family crisis in the making.

"I, uhm..." Jonathan hesitated, then sighed out in exasperation. "Before the chief and mom got you back, Nancy—" he almost choked on her name "—Nancy and I lured the monster to our house and beat it up."

There was a moment of silence.

"Holy shit," Dustin whispered wistfully, breaking the silence. He looked up at Jonathan in admiration.

"You *what*?" Will all but screeched out, his face dangerously turning red.

"We turned out *okay*, Will," Jonathan reassured him. Will had been increasingly paranoid and protective of everyone ever since the incident, and while it was understandable, it was also kind of annoying.

"That's the *stupidest* thing you've ever done!"

"It's *done*, Will," Jonathan argued back. "I wasn't really hurt. Nancy... Nancy wasn't really hurt."

"Yeah, she only, like, disappeared," Dustin commented.

Lucas' hand came flying to hit him on his shoulder. "Dude!" he admonished. "Not cool!"

"Speaking of which!" Steve interrupted, silently hoping that the Byers Sibling Drama was over for the moment. "What's Plan B?"

"Plan B?" Jonathan asked, almost incredulous, and noticeably still on edge from Will's outburst. "There is *no* Plan B. There's probably an open portal in the forest, and it's not safe for us to roam about there at night."

"We're talking about *portals* now?" Dustin asked from his position, his brow crinkling in concern.

"How else would you explain what happened?" Jonathan countered. "It's how this whole thing started."

"Yeah, that makes sense."

"So, Mike and Eleven *might* still be in the Upside Down?" Lucas asked. "And Nancy?"

"If there is a portal in the forest, and you really heard El, then they've probably already gotten out," said Dustin.

"Which means they're probably in the forest *right now*!"

"Hey!" Steve admonished them. "These are all just theories for now. Any of you little shits go exploring the forest later night, you'll be answering to the chief, got it?"

"Oh my god!" Will all but shouted, the realization hitting him like a truck. "The chief was also at the forest last night! He probably has them!"

"Where would the chief keep *three fugitives*?" Lucas asked, ever the voice of reason, brow crinkled in skepticism.

"His basement?" Dustin suggested. It was all so ironic, they could cry. "I mean, if *Mike* can keep one from his parents in *their* basement for a week, I'm pretty sure the chief could keep three from the rest of the town."

"Surprisingly, that makes sense," Lucas agreed.

Dustin grinned triumphantly. "I have my moments."

"So, what, are we gonna break in the chief's house or something?" Steve asked, crossing his arms. After portals and monsters, the police chief hiding three fugitives didn't really sound so crazy. "We don't even know where he lives."

"Will can find out," Dustin suggested.

"*What?*" Will replied, revulsion etched in his expression. "How am I supposed to do that?"

"Your mom's *dating* the chief," Lucas reasoned. "You'll find a way."

"*What?*" Jonathan can't help but shout. "Our mom is *what*? And you want Will to do *what*?"

"This is hardly the time to speculate on your mother's love life, Jonathan," Dustin said, all diplomatic. "There are more important matters to discuss."

"Okay, so," Steve interrupted, "let's say that little Byers here *does* find out where the chief lives, then what?"

"Like you said, we break in."